Road warriors carry own entertainment

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All serious road warriors begin their voyages with the most honourable intentions. Before leaving, they load up necessary files, documents and e-mail messages. They plot a strategy to use uninterrupted time in the air to work on outstanding projects that have piled up.

Of course, soon after takeoff, reality sets in. They've worked a long hard day, put in their time and need a rest. A glass of wine, a reclining seat, the window and blue sky — they're ready to take a break.

But here lies the problem: Road warriors have already seen the airline movie, listened to the audio channels and are tired of reading a book. That's why on an increasing number of flights, you'll find serious travellers equipping themselves with two of the hottest technologies — portable DVD (digital video disc) and MP3 players.

You can find quite a few innovative portable DVD players on the market, but they involve carrying around some extra hardware. That is why so many executives equip their laptop computers with a built-in DVD-ROM feature rather than a regular CD-ROM player.

Over the past few months, I've had the pleasure of travelling with an IBM Thinkpad A20. Prior to leaving on a trip, I'll visit a local movie store and rent a few DVDs to take with me. I can then view one on my laptop, and listen through my headphones, turning the computer into a portable theatre.

One problem for road warriors is that they often don't get a chance to finish watching a movie en route. To get around that, some of them have used a program from the Internet called DeCSS, which lets them copy a movie to their hard drive, so they can still watch it after returning the DVD to the store.

Keep in mind that they need lots of hard disk space on their laptop to do this, as a movie takes up about eight gigabytes. But there is another, more serious concern: The program is technically illegal in the United States. It breaks the encryption on a DVD movie, hence violating provisions of the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act.

Not surprisingly, the product has made Hollywood executives apoplectic, fearing people may use the program to make illegal copies of DVDs. A number of lawsuits have been launched over the program.

The other new device that will appeal to the road warrior is Creative Labs Nomad Jukebox. Available for $499 (U.S.), it's an MP3 player that is really a computer with a tiny 6.4-gigabyte hard drive built in.

The size of a portable CD player, it lets you take with you about 100 hours of music, or several thousand songs, enough to keep you entertained for long periods of time. Transfer music from your CDs to the jukebox before you go, and once you are in flight, plug in your headphones, settle back and listen to your own choice of music.

The only problem with such tools is the continuing issue of battery life. We can only hope that the airlines get the hint that road warriors are becoming their own entertainers and want the juice required.

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